



## ELL PROGRAMS:

## Not 'One Size Fits All'

by Andrea Honigsfeld

With the number of English Language Learners on a steady rise, elementary school educators need to advocate in their schools and communities for the adoption of an appropriate ELL program.

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*José's parents had to make one of the greatest decisions of their lives. Moving to the United States and starting a new life was a longtime plan, but choosing where to settle down was difficult. Being near relatives or friends in big cities (some are on the east coast and others on the west) suggested security, but word of mouth attracted them to a small town in the Midwest. So much of José's life will change in the next few days as he enters school and starts learning in English. Among myriad unpredictable adjustments he and his family will face, one is the type of English as a Second Language instruction he will receive.*



Rising immigration in the United States has been accompanied by growth in the number of children from homes where a language other than English is spoken. Of utmost national concern is to provide the best possible program models and educational opportunities to address the diverse needs of this growing group of students. This article provides an overview of program organization issues related to the needs of elementary school English Language Learners.

## The Immigrant Population

Urban Institute researchers (Capps et al. 2005) reported that the Limited English Proficient population in the United States grew by 52 percent between 1990 and 2000—from 14.0 million to 21.3 million. Using data from the U.S. Census Bureau, Thomas and Collier (2002) projected that students with a home language other than English will comprise 40 percent of the school-age population by 2030, which might turn out to be a rather cautious estimate. Fix and Passel (2003), of the Urban Institute's Immigration Studies Program, calculated that as early as 2015, children of immigrants will constitute 30 percent of the nation's school population.

Most government and state agencies use the term Limited English Proficient (LEP) when referring to children who do not communicate well in English, which is their second language. On the other hand, schools, teacher educators, and advocacy groups generally don't categorize children born to at least one immigrant parent as Limited English Proficient. These groups tend to prefer the term English Language Learner (ELL) or English Learner (EL), to focus on the child and not the deficiency.

## Program Models

In some schools, several program models might be available to students having ELL status. In others, only one type of support program might be offered.

Depending on the researcher and the methodology, program models might be categorized into three main types (Rossell 2003) to as many as six or more (Genesee 1999; Center for School and District Improvement 2004). In an extensive research project to compare outcomes of program models that educated recently arrived Spanish-speaking children from Puerto Rico, Laos (2000, 8–9) identified five models:

- **English-language monolingual program.** The child is in a regular English-language monolingual classroom, receiving no instruction designed especially for language-minority students.

- **English-monolingual-plus-ESL program.** The child is in a regular English-language monolingual classroom, but also receives instruction in English as a Second Language (ESL).
- **Transitional bilingual education program.** Placed in a bilingual education classroom, the child receives some form of English-language instruction (e.g., ESL), but also is taught in Spanish. Gradually, instruction in and through Spanish is replaced by instruction solely through English. The goal is for the student to join a regular monolingual English-language program as quickly as possible.
- **Maintenance bilingual education program.** Like students in transitional bilingual education programs, the child is placed in a bilingual education classroom and receives some form of English-language instruction. Both English and Spanish are used regularly as languages of instruction. The fundamental difference between transitional and maintenance bilingual education programs is that the latter aim to develop full proficiency in both languages.
- **Structured immersion program.** The child is in a classroom in which the subject matter is presented in English, but in a manner that students with limited English-language proficiency can understand. The student may address the instructor in Spanish when his or her English-language proficiency is insufficient. Spanish language arts may be taught as one of the subjects. The instructor knows Spanish, but rarely uses it except when teaching it as a subject.

When a district is considering a potential language support program, the following questions can be useful before establishing a particular type of program (Center for School and District Improvement 2004, 11):

1. Who will provide instruction to the English Language Learners?
2. What type of curriculum and methods of instruction are we going to use?
3. What will be the language(s) of instruction?
4. Is the desired outcome for ELLs to become bilingual or to exit the program and be mainstreamed?

To help navigate the maze of programs, four of the most common program models are discussed here. These are Structured English Immersion, English as a Second Language, Bilingual Education, and Dual Language.



## Structured English Immersion

California's Proposition 227 (California State Legislature 1998, para. 7) mandates: "all children in California public schools shall be taught English as rapidly and effectively as possible." Similar legislation, Arizona's Proposition 203 (Arizona State Legislature 2003, 1) requires:

*pupils who are "English learners" to be taught in English immersion classes during a temporary transition period not normally intended to exceed 1 year. Once pupils have acquired a good working knowledge of English and are able to do regular schoolwork in English, they are required to be transferred to classrooms where students either are native English language speakers or already have acquired reasonable fluency in English ("English language mainstream classrooms").*

"The trend to limit language support for ELLs to one-year English immersion programs raises significant civil rights problems."

Both of these states as well as others, such as Massachusetts, increased their English immersion programs. According to guidelines for the implementation of Structured English Immersion programs (SEI), ELLs are placed in self-contained classes where they receive English and content instruction all day. The program may resemble a "sink or swim" approach of much earlier times, according to which ELLs are placed in mainstream classrooms and are expected to master mainstream curriculum with support only from the classroom teacher.

Current research and understanding of the needs of ELLs identify SEI as the least favored approach to providing appropriate instruction to ELLs. Specifically, an Arizona team of researchers and school district administrators (Mahoney, MacSwan, and Thompson 2005, 3.18) found that:

*a substantial amount of rigorous and scientifically designed evaluation research now exists that suggests structured English immersion (SEI) may have negative effects on student learning relative to bilingual*

*alternatives. A review of [Arizona] state's English language proficiency data suggests that students are not achieving English fluency at the rate anticipated by proponents of Proposition 203 and that the theory underlying the model is false. Other research evidence suggests that children in Arizona's bilingual education programs learned English at a reasonable rate while receiving instruction in academic subjects in their native language.*

Furthermore, on behalf of the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, Ma (2002, 11) prepared a report that claimed:

*The trend to limit language support for ELLs to one-year English immersion programs raises significant civil rights problems in light of the existing body of educational research. . . . Because research indicates that one year of instruction is not enough time for children to attain English proficiency, one-year English immersion programs should not be imposed on all schools. A child's civil rights should not rest upon dubious research or educational theories even if they are wholeheartedly embraced by political decision-makers or by overly deferential judges. Furthermore, strict one-year English immersion programs are likely to violate current federal law.*

Based on these findings, one may conclude that examining other program models and reconsidering the implications of both Proposition 227 and Proposition 203 are long overdue.

## English as a Second Language

In an English as a Second Language program model, students who are identified as ELLs receive specially designed language and academic instruction for the entire school day, or some part of it, in English. The more proficient the students are, the fewer hours they tend to spend with an ESL specialist. Some state education departments, such as New York's, have developed closely monitored guidelines for the number of periods each ELL is entitled to receive ESL services (New York State Education Department 2008). ESL programs may take several formats. Most prevalent are the "pull-out" or "push-in" programs. As indicated by their names, the ESL specialist either provides ESL services in a designated area outside the classroom (usually in a specially equipped ESL classroom)—thus the name "pull out"; or he or she offers language support in the mainstream classroom.

Pull-out programs also may be referred to as self-standing ESL instruction. The ESL specialist either follows



a specially designed ESL curriculum that is based on the participating students' individual language and academic needs, or he or she might develop a curriculum closely aligned with the mainstream curriculum. Within the pull-out setting, ELLs benefit from small group instruction and the unique adaptations to the mainstream curriculum that the ESL specialist is able to offer.

If the ESL specialist provides instruction in the mainstream classroom, there are a few additional considerations:

1. Will the ESL teacher pull ELLs aside to a learning center or a designated area in the classroom and teach a stand-alone ESL curriculum?
2. Will the ESL teacher pull ELLs aside to a learning center or a designated area in the classroom and support the mainstream curriculum by following the lesson conducted by the classroom teacher?
3. Will the ESL teacher and ELLs be integrated into the mainstream teacher's lesson through differentiated instructional strategies?
4. Will the ESL teacher and the mainstream teacher collaboratively plan and carry out the instruction following one of several possible co-teaching models?

For implementation of teacher collaborations, refer to Vaughn, Schumm, and Arguelles (1997), Wertheimer and Honigsfeld (2000), or Honigsfeld and Dove (2008).

How does one make these classroom level organizational decisions? Each of the following factors contributes to the decision-making process:

1. Availability of ESL support personnel. Are there highly qualified and certified ESL teachers or ESL teaching assistants?
2. Classroom space. Is there a separate ESL classroom for pull-out services, or is there a shortage of classroom space—such as in some large urban schools?
3. The instructional philosophy of the district or school. Are mainstream teachers and ESL specialists encouraged to collaborate? Are they given common preparation periods to plan together?

ESL programs across the nation tend to align their instruction and curriculum with both the national TESOL PreK–12 English language proficiency standards (2006) and state or local standards such as the New York State ESL Standards (Office of Bilingual Education 2004). The relationships among the various curricular, instructional, and policy factors are intricate: Instructional decisions are triggered by national, state, and local (district or school-based) learning standards.

As teachers plan their instruction, they need to consider both ESL and mainstream content area standards for ELLs. Standards offer guidance for teachers regarding high, yet reasonable grade-appropriate expectations and typical language performances by proficiency levels. When designing appropriate learning experiences embedded in a thematic unit, teachers also should consider their students' varied cognitive and linguistic readiness levels and unique learning needs by incorporating differentiated instructional techniques.

### *Bilingual Education*

Bilingual education has been in the center of political and educational debates for decades (Krashen 1999), and there are just as many proponents as opponents of these programs. However, carefully designed, longitudinal research studies showing the effectiveness of these program models cannot, and should not, be ignored. The two main subtypes of bilingual education focus on the ultimate outcome of the program:

- Is it to help students exit the bilingual classroom and enter the mainstream, "English only" setting as soon as possible? This model is often referred to as Transitional Bilingual Education.
- Is it to maintain and further enhance the native language while simultaneously helping students develop English language proficiency and literacy? This model is labeled as Maintenance, Developmental, or Late-Exit Bilingual Education and may be considered an enrichment program alternative.

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Within each program model are several options to consider. The most prevalent feature is the amount of time spent on each of the target languages. When Thomas and Collier (2002) examined various bilingual education programs, they described one-way bilingual



programs (both the Transitional and Developmental types) as following either a 90/10 or 50/50 model. In the 90/10 model, students initially receive 90 percent of the instruction in their native language, which is gradually reduced to about 50 percent by the 5th grade. In the 50/50 model, one or two teachers use both the native language and English in approximately equal amounts of time for instructional purposes throughout the implementation process.

Corroborating several other research teams and practitioner groups, Rolstad, Mahoney, and Glass (2005) found that bilingual education is consistently superior to program models that follow English-only approaches. They also concluded that when the two bilingual education program types were compared, developmental bilingual education programs were found to be superior to transitional bilingual education programs.

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### *Dual Language Programs*

Dual language, or two-way bilingual, models are among the fastest growing program initiatives focusing on enrichment for both native and nonnative speakers of English. This program model supports ELLs' and their native English speaking classmates' linguistic and academic development in two languages. In many states, dual language is expanding to numerous schools—especially in Texas, New Mexico, New York, California, Washington, Illinois, and the Washington, DC metropolitan area (Thomas and Collier 2002, 17). Dual language programs used in the United States tend to fall into one of the following two categories:

- Minority-language dominant programs. These programs follow an instructional pattern of using

the minority language either for 90 percent or 80 percent of the time.

- Balanced programs. In these programs, instructional time is equally divided between the minority language and English (Howard and Sugarman 2001). Recommended practice is for the program to separate systematically the two languages by day or other time schedule, subject matter, teacher, or a combination of these (Cloud, Genesee, and Hamayan 2000).

### **What Works?**

A research brief issued by CREDE (Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence 2003) summarized three key findings related to program choice and effectiveness:

- The 90/10 and 50/50 Two-Way Bilingual Immersion (Dual Language) and One-Way Developmental Bilingual Education programs are the only programs found to date that help students fully reach the 50th percentile (scoring above 50 percent of the other test takers) in both their native language and English in all subject areas as well as to maintain that level of high achievement, or reach even higher levels through the end of their schooling. The fewest dropouts come from these programs.
- ELLs who attended English-only mainstream programs because their parents refused language support services showed large decreases in reading and math achievement by Grade 5 when compared to students who participated in language support programs. The largest number of dropouts came from this group.
- When ELLs initially exit a language support program into the English mainstream, those schooled in all-English medium programs (ESL) outperform those schooled in the bilingual programs when tested in English. By the middle school years, however, the students schooled in bilingual programs reach the same levels of achievement as those schooled all in English. Further, during the high school years, the students schooled in bilingual programs outperform the students schooled in all English.

As early as 1995, Sakash and Rodriguez-Brown offered an extensive list of possible activities that may lead to better coordination of efforts and enhanced communication between service providers in mainstream, ESL, and bilingual programs within the same school or school district. Some of these activities include the following tips (Sakash and Rodriguez-Brown 1995):



1. Bilingual and mainstream teachers jointly organize and sequence the bilingual curriculum so that it aligns with the mainstream curriculum (may be targeted for a specific content area such as math, science, or social studies).
2. Bilingual and mainstream teachers jointly review texts and learning materials and coordinate the purchase of the same for both programs.
3. Bilingual and mainstream teachers observe one another's classrooms for the purpose of understanding one another's teaching methods and to observe individual students in each instructional setting.
4. Bilingual and mainstream teachers hold joint parent conferences to facilitate coordination and communication with parents.
5. Bilingual and mainstream teachers hold regular meetings to discuss individual students' progress.
6. Bilingual and mainstream teachers of the same grade plan units of instruction together based on an integrated thematic approach to learning.
7. Bilingual and mainstream peer tutoring projects pair LEP students with non-LEP students of the same age across classrooms.
8. Cultural information is shared at regular meetings between mainstream and regular classroom teachers for the purpose of clarifying students' behavior and sensitizing teachers to cultural differences.
9. Multicultural concepts are infused into the mainstream curriculum by teams of bilingual and mainstream teachers who work together.
10. Mainstream teachers become sensitized to Hispanic students' preferred learning styles and develop skills in promoting achievement-related behaviors.

## Closing Thoughts

A final question remains: Which is the best possible program model for our English Language Learners? If we believe that one size does *not* fit all, there cannot be one right answer to this question. Each model has its merits; each model has numerous documented success stories. What Zigler and Weiss (1985, 199) noted in 1985 still holds true: research on program effectiveness must "go beyond the question of whether or not a program 'works' to ask what works, for whom, how, when, and why." Though the educational context has changed considerably since the 1980s, their message is still valid.

In the age of accountability and standardized assessments, debates continue regarding the impact of No

*Child Left Behind* on English Language Learners. Educators and administrators need to take on a pronounced role of advocacy to help schools and communities learn about the organizational, curricular, and instructional program options for their ELL students, whether they were born in the United States or have recently arrived. All stakeholders engaged collaboratively in a local decision-making process may be able to come to a decision regarding what program models to use for which students, how to initially pilot new programs, when to maintain programs, and why to revise existing programs. ■

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